

George F. Will

A 'Dispirited Decade'

Ten years later there is only one consolation, one small, odd consolation. Had Oswald missed, the subsequent decade would have been just about as despiriting as it was anyway.

Two things made this a harrowing decade, the war and racial conflict.

In his short tenure President Kennedy made the decisive decisions that were to determine the course of the war. And there was precious little he could have done to alter the course that race relations took between 1963 and 1968.

President Kennedy made the decision to send armed American men in uniform to Asia authorized to get shot at and to shoot back. He and his advisers were involved in the events that culminated in the murder of South Vietnam's President Diem. When you connive at the forcible overthrow of an ally's government, and influence the selection of its replacement, you are, like it or not, treaty or no, deeply committed to keeping that ally afloat.

Some of his former aides suggest that at some unspecified moment, for some unspecified reason, President Kennedy would have reversed his consistent policy and would have settled in Vietnam in some unspecified way, on some unspecified terms. This is hard to credit.

President Kennedy was an early believer in the "domino theory" and in the use of counterinsurgency warfare techniques to keep the lead domino upright. The principal advisers President Johnson relied on regarding Vietnam—McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, Max-

well Taylor—were brought to power by President Kennedy, who would have continued to rely on them.

These men, like the two Presidents they honorably served, were bewildered by a truly bewildering phenomenon—a limited war that required more than just the restrained but otherwise conventional use of conventional forces. Reading—or perhaps misleading; at any rate, misapplying—a "lesson" of the second world war, these men shared a misplaced faith

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in the effectiveness of air power, especially in interdicting supply movements.

Viewed from even this short distance, the striking thing about Vietnam policy, 1963-68, is the continuity of men and measures, the clear line of progress from early premises to later policies.

Regarding race relations, the pressures that had built during the 1950s could not have been completely controlled by any leaders, white or black. But the nation was incalculably fortunate in two regards.

Martin Luther King, dealing with the most explosive American passions of the century, proved to be the most sophisticated and responsible political leader of his time. We do not owe the emergence of Mr. King to President Kennedy or any other white leader.

Moreover, it is a curious truth that John Kennedy did his greatest service

to black Americans before he became President—on the morning after he was nominated at the Los Angeles convention, when he picked Lyndon Johnson for his running mate.

Johnson, whose presence on the ticket did what it was supposed to do—it held the South for the Democrats, and thus elected President Kennedy—proved to be the most sympathetic and effective white advocate of black people's causes since Lincoln.

If President Kennedy had lived, Barry Goldwater would have run against him with a special zest. Because the ideological and regional differences would have been more sharply defined than they were in Senator Goldwater's race against President Johnson, the 1964 election would not have been such a rout. Republican forces in Congress would not have been so thoroughly mangled. And President Kennedy, lacking Lyndon Johnson's legislative skills, also would have lacked the 1964-66 Democratic advantage in Congress that made the landmark civil rights legislation.

True, there is a great imponderable that is relevant to John Kennedy's unfulfilled promise. He would have communicated better than his successor did with the American people.

We certainly are in no position today to underestimate the historic importance of communication, and the trust it can inspire. Still, communications or no, events in train when Kennedy died probably would have caused him to exclaim in 1968, as Lincoln did in 1864, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."